Chapter 1
The Role of Structural Racism for Inequality in Family Poverty: Why Context Matters

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Although the United States is among the richest countries in the world, there are enduring inequalities across racial lines when it comes to economic well-being. It has been well-documented that on average, White individuals and families have typically fared better than their Non-White counterparts in terms of poverty, income, and wealth. Despite the salient history of race and racism that undergirds American society, prevailing explanations for racial disparities, particularly disparate poverty rates, have placed heavy emphasis on individual/family demographics/characteristics, (e.g., family structure, education level, employment status). For instance, racial differentials in poverty have been attributed to the racial differences in family structure (see Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; Haskins & Sawhill, 2016; Iceland, 2019; McLanahan, 1985). This reflects what Brady (2019) summarizes as a behavioral theory of poverty, which posits that poor people are poor "because they engage in counterproductive, poverty-increasing behavior or risks like single motherhood or unemployment" (p. 158). Of course, individuals and their actions are not inconsequential. Decisions, such as those regarding family and fertility, education, and employment, certainly can and do influence a family's outcomes, which in turn, can impact inequality across families. However, the problem lies when studies of (and efforts to address) racial inequality consider only the role of individual-level factors. Focusing only on individual characteristics and circumstances presumes and/or gives the false impression that macro forces and broader circumstances do not matter. Yet both micro- and macro-level phenomena help shape individual outcomes.

In this chapter, I draw on the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959) to make the case that in order to advance our understanding of racial inequalities in poverty (and other socioeconomic outcomes) across families in the United States, we must

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acknowledge the role of macrosocial and historical contexts in shaping individual outcomes and broader inequalities. I highlight contemporary racial inequality in socioeconomic outcomes to underline why we need to advance our understanding of racial inequality and the socio-historical context of race and racism in the United States. I then discuss the socio-historical origins of race and structural racism, highlighting the social construction of race and the U.S. racial regime. Next, I briefly summarize the conclusions from studies of racial inequality that focus on the role of family structure. In doing so, I highlight some recent examples in family scholarship that challenge the prevailing emphasis on individual-level family demographics. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of why more research on structural racism is warranted and the implications of this for family inequality scholarship and policy.

The Sociological Imagination: The Significance of Macrosocial and Historical Context

The late sociologist C. Wright Mills in his famous work, "The Sociological Imagination," stated, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (1959, p. 3). Embracing this distinct viewpoint of sociology is more commonly known as possessing "the sociological imagination." Though people's lives are intricately connected to the broader society, they are seldom aware of the "interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them" (Mills, 1959, p. 4). Therefore, the valuable perspective of the sociological imagination encourages the recognition of how our individual experiences and everyday lives are powerfully shaped by broader/macrosocial forces, both of which are to be understood in a historical context. That is, the sociological imagination provides a useful framing to illuminate how micro- and macro-level phenomena are linked.

Linking the micro- and macro phenomenon in our lives is essential to understanding that what we may perceive as a "personal trouble" concerning an individual is actually a "public issue" that affects a lot of people in patterned ways (Mills, 1959). Thus, the sociological imagination is a useful point of departure to better understand societal issues. Let us consider socioeconomic racial disparities in the United States. Specifically, in both research and policy efforts, poverty is too often seen as a personal trouble attributed to certain individual-level characteristics. However, a non-trivial number of Americans (37.9 million) live in poverty based on the Official Poverty Measure (OPM), and a disproportionate share of these individuals are Black and Hispanic (Creamer et al., 2022). I argue that poverty is a pressing public issue impacting families and requires moving beyond an understanding of individual circumstances to fully understand and address it.

In the section to follow, I briefly describe the levels and trends of poverty, income, and wealth in the United States to illustrate the persistent socioeconomic racial

gaps. In doing so, I highlight the need for research to consider the socio-historical context to more adequately scrutinize socioeconomic differences that persist across racial lines in families.

Persistent Racial Disparities in Poverty, Income, and Wealth

Despite the measures used, there are racial disparities in poverty in the United States. Fig. 1.1 shows U.S. Census Bureau poverty estimates using the official poverty measure (OPM) and the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) by race/ethnicity for 2021 (Creamer et al., 2022).

Across both measures, poverty rates are lowest for White individuals. OPM poverty rates in 2021 were 8.1% for White individuals, 9.3% for Asians individuals, 14.2% for individuals of two or more races, 17.1% for Hispanic individuals, 19.5% for Black individuals, and 20% for American Indian and Alaska Native individuals (Creamer et al., 2022). Although SPM rates are lower than OPM rates overall, racial disparities remain, with White Americans having the lowest poverty rate (5.7%), followed by individuals who are of two or more race (7.3%), Asian (9.5%), Black (11.3%), Hispanic (11.2%), and American Indian and Alaska Native (12.4%).

Similarly, recent U.S. poverty studies incorporating different poverty measures (e.g., the OPM, the SPM, and a relative poverty measure) to examine racial disparities over time find that poverty rates for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native individuals have persistently been at least double those of White and Asian individuals (Baker et al., 2022; Iceland, 2019). Although these studies show these racial gaps in poverty have narrowed over time, they also show that sizable racial gaps remain. Even when employing higher-quality income data (accounting for underreporting of income) and better poverty measures to provide improved estimates of racial inequality these large racial disparities persist (Baker et al. 2022), further highlighting the significance of this issue.

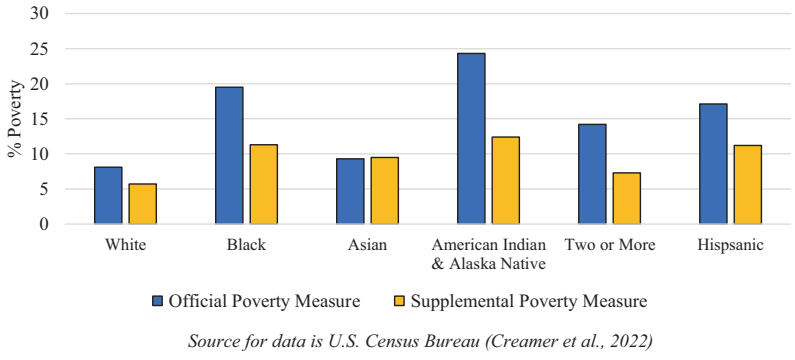

Fig. 1.1 Poverty rates by race/ethnicity in the United States, 2021. (The source for data is the U.S. Census Bureau (Creamer et al., 2022))

Given the racial disparities in poverty, it is not surprising that there are also racial disparities in income because income is the basis for poverty measurement. According to 2021 U.S. Census estimates, the median household income by race of the householder was highest among Asian households at $101,478, followed by White households at $74,246. Hispanic and Black households had much lower median incomes at $57,981 and $48,297, respectively (Semega & Kollar, 2022). Like poverty, these racial disparities in household income have endured over time. Given Black and Hispanic workers have seen little change in their earnings relative to White workers in recent years (Kochhar & Bennett, 2021) the racial disparities in income will inevitably persist.

Wealth holdings further shed light on the socioeconomic racial disparities that persist in the United States. Like poverty, White households hold significantly higher wealth than Black and Hispanic households. According to statistics from the Survey of Consumer Finance, White households hold 87% of the overall wealth in the United States, despite accounting for only 68% of the households in the survey (Aladangady & Forde, 2021). In contrast, Black and Hispanic households each account for only about 3% of the total wealth while accounting for 16% and 11% of the U.S. population, respectively. Aladangady and Forde (2021) note that if wealth holding was commensurate with their proportion of the population, the amount of wealth held by Black households would be over 5 times higher, and for Hispanic households it would be nearly 4 times higher. Moreover, racial wealth gaps have endured and increased over time (Aladangady & Forde, 2021). This is important considering households lacking wealth can find themselves in a financially vulnerable position and potentially in poverty if they experience a job loss, an expensive medical emergency, or some other financial crisis that adversely impacts their income. After the Great Recession, Black households, and to a lesser extent, Hispanic households, were less likely than White households to financially recover, and wealth inequality grew (Addo & Darity, 2021). This suggests the financial crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic will further exacerbate racial gaps in the long term. Indeed, research suggests that compared to White workers, Black and Hispanic workers face worse economic and health repercussions as a result of the pandemic, which serves to widen already existing racial gaps in wealth (Wilson, 2020).

In sum, these statistics on poverty, income, and wealth paint a clear picture of enduring racial gaps. On average, White (and for the most part, Asian) families continue to fare socioeconomically better than Black and Hispanic families (and American Indian/Alaska Native families when included in the analysis). So, what accounts for these differences across races? Taking a socio-historical perspective is a useful approach for addressing this question. In the section to follow, I discuss the socio-historical context of race and racism in the United States, a focus I argue is necessary to truly understand racial inequalities across families today.

Race and Structural Racism in the United States

Contextualizing Race as a Social Construct

To advance our understanding of what accounts for racial differences in poverty (and other types of socioeconomic inequality) across families, it is important to first acknowledge the conceptualization of race (or racial categories) as a social construct (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Understanding that race is socially constructed places emphasis on "the processes and mechanisms via racism that reproduce racial inequality in poverty" (Williams & Baker, 2021). Regarding the social construction of race, in her book, *Fatal Invention,* Dorothy Roberts (2011) offers the following summary:

> Like citizenship, race is a political system that governs people by sorting them into social groupings based on invented biological demarcations. Race is not only interpreted according to invented rules, but, more important, race itself is an invented political grouping. Race is not a biological category that is politically charged. It is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one. (p. 4)

Indeed, it has been proven that there is no biological basis for racial categories; no genetic differences exist between racialized groups. Rather, "race was literally manufactured by law" when officials established the categories of "White," "Negro," and "Indian" to distinguish indentured servitude from Black enslavement, with the goal of preventing Black and White servants from joining ranks against the elite class (Roberts, 2011, p. 9). The institutionalization of people in this way helped solidify racial boundaries that were defined by otherwise meaningless phenotypical characteristics and were used to justify unjust treatment along these boundaries (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014). Hence, "the creation of racial categories required racism—the ideology or belief that human groups can be hierarchically structured" (Williams & Baker, 2021, p. 7). In other words, as shown in Fig. 1.2, that racism was a prerequisite for racial categories is a defining feature of the social construction of race.

In turn, the establishment of racial categories gave way to what Bonilla-Silva (1997) describes as a racialized social system in which those racialized as White secure a privileged position at the top of the social hierarchy via ideologies, laws, and social practices. Thus, in a racialized social system, White individuals benefit economically, politically, and socially, often to the disadvantage of those at the bottom of the skin hierarchy (i.e., those racialized as Black; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Mills, 1997). Consequently, racial inequalities, like poverty disparities, persist because such inequalities are inherent to a racialized social system (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Fig. 1.2 The social construction of race and racial inequality

The racialized social system in the United States can be characterized as a racial regime, which is a system of rule based on racial hierarchy (resulting from the social construction of race) that essentially functions to sustain racial inequality (Holden, 1995; Ivery & Bassett, 2015; Omi & Winant, 2014). Founded on ideals of White supremacy, the U.S. racial regime has been in place since the onset of African slavery, having endured despite being challenged and reconfigured (Omi & Winant, 2014). The U.S. racial regime is characterized by both macro-level, large-scale activities and micro-level, individual practices that together shape racial inequality (Omi & Winant, 2014). Individuals maintain a degree of agency within the racial regime, but their views and behaviors are fundamentally tied to a position within the regime that is characterized by benefit or disadvantage in the racialized system (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Hence, "within the racial regime, the benefits of White privilege can impact individual actions, helping uphold White supremacy, and producing and maintaining racial inequalities, such as contemporary poverty disparities" (Baker, 2022b, p. 1725). As Fig. 1.2 illustrates, the social construction of race is inherently linked to racial inequality.

Structural Racism

Racism is often thought to be a result of individual action but thinking of racism only in terms of the individual obscures how racism is structural. Structural racism involves "macrolevel systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another to generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups" (Gee & Ford, 2011, p. 116). Structural racism "can be perpetuated through conscious intent, unconscious bias, or policies and practices that privilege one group over another" (Ray, 2022, p. 18). Though racism (and thus racial inequality) is present at all levels of society, structural racism emphasizes the highly influential role of macro-level structures in society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Gee & Ford, 2011). Racism is so deeply embedded in macrolevel structures that the impact of structural racism is consequential, regardless of the role of individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Structural racism via societal institutions is one mechanism that can impact racial inequality across families. Institutions are essentially stable agreements and historical settlements that regulate and shape individual and collective behavior (Brady et al., 2016). A rich literature describes how racial practices and racism embedded in everyday institutions in society produce and maintain racial inequality (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2014; Golash-Boza, 2016; Ray, 2019). Indeed, numerous studies underscore how contemporary everyday institutions can impact families differently across racial lines to produce inequality. Examples include (but are not limited to) studies on the labor market (Reskin, 2012; Pager et al., 2009), the housing market (Korver-Glenn, 2021; Taylor, 2019), schools, welfare state (Brown, 2013; Parolin, 2021), and the criminal legal system (Western & Pettit, 2010; Miller, 2021).

Institutions can be influential even after they are formally dismantled, leaving legacies through the reproduction of material resources and cultural conditions that result from the institution having been in place (e.g., slavery; Ruef & Fletcher, 2003). Indeed, racially oppressive institutions have immediate harmful effects but also carry long-term effects that underlie social, economic, political, and educational resources and opportunities available to families for generations to come (Feagin, 2014). This exemplifies structural racism.

At the same time, "structural racism doesn't mean individual racism is inconsequential. It means individual racism is empowered through its incorporation into a system that can magnify its impact through biased patterns of resource allocation" (Ray, 2022, p. 18). Additionally, the systemic nature of structural racism affects the actions, views, attitudes, and emotions of individual actors (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). In other words, the micro and macro are mutually reinforcing. It is also important to note that having individual animus is not necessary for individuals to contribute to structural racism. This is because when part of a racialized system consisting of policies and laws that are inherently biased, structural racism can lead to individuals perpetuating racism without even purposely doing so (e.g., a test prompter administering a racially biased standard exam; Ray, 2022). Thus, all-in-all, the impact of structural racism cannot be understated.

Critical to understanding the role of structural racism is understanding the historical foundations of the U.S. racial regime. As Omi and Winant (2014) state, "We cannot step outside of race and racism, since our society and our identities are constituted by them; we lie in a racial history" (p. 137). Consider the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow which reflect the historical racial regime (Baker, 2022b). They are examples of historical institutions explicitly created to conquer, oppress, and maintain subordinate positions in society that have had a lasting impact (Snipp, 1996). Slavery was a cruel institution of the domination and exploitation of Black people (Du Bois, 1994). Not only did slavery generate wealth for White people, but it also enabled them to define their superior social status, ensure social division, and influence race relations and racial inequality in the long term (Omi & Winant, 2014; Woodward, 1955) by limiting the economic rights and wealth accumulation of Black people (Oliver & Shapiro, 2013). Jim Crow followed the emancipation of slavery and Reconstruction. Jim Crow served as "a tripartite system of domination (Morris, 1984), because it was designed to control Blacks politically and socially, and to exploit them economically" (Morris, 1999, p. 518). Examples of mechanisms of this tripartite are sharecropping, disfranchisement, and segregation, which all served as "major institutional mechanisms for maintaining racial inequality" (Biggs & Andrews, 2015, p. 417).

A growing scholarship has empirically demonstrated the significance of structural racism via these historical institutions for contemporary outcomes. Much of this work has focused on the consequential legacy of slavery (e.g., Berger, 2018; Curtis & O'Connell, 2017; Levernier & White, 1998; Nunn, 2008; O'Connell, 2012; Reece, 2020; Ruef, 2014). For instance, O'Connell (2012) links the 1860 slave concentration to the contemporary Black-White poverty gap in U.S. Southern counties. Other scholars show a relationship between slavery concentration and

unequal economic mobility (Berger, 2018), White socioeconomic gains (Reece, 2020), and political attitudes (Acharya et al., 2018). Subsequent research builds upon this literature by conceptualizing and constructing a measure of the historical racial regime (HRR) which reflects different institutional manifestations of the U.S. racial regime across the historical periods of slavery and Jim Crow (Baker, 2022b). This research demonstrates that the HRR worsens Black poverty and racial inequality in poverty in the South (Baker, 2022b). Collectively, this growing scholarship underlines the value of considering the role of historical context, particularly regarding structural racism, in understanding racial inequality today.

Individual Context and Racial Disparities across Families in Research

Emphasizing Single Motherhood as a Poverty & Inequality Mechanism

Despite the salience of race and racism in U.S. history and the multitude of ways that structural racism can influence individual lives, family inequality scholarship has not given as much attention to this important macro-level factor as it has to individual-level context (see O'Connell, Chap. 3 for more on this point). Generally, when it comes to understanding enduring racial differences in poverty among families, both scholarship and policy have emphasized the role of individual/family characteristics/behaviors. According to behavioral theories, engaging in behaviors or risks that are more susceptible to poverty is the reason people are poor (see Brady, 2019 for a review). The four major individual-level poverty risks that are typically given the most attention are single motherhood, low education, young headship, and unemployment (Brady et al., 2017). Although all four of these risks have been shown to increase the odds of poverty, single motherhood is perhaps the most studied risk in poverty literature.

The logic behind the emphasis on single motherhood in explaining racial inequality in poverty seems straightforward. Poverty rates have been historically higher among single-mother families vs. married-parent families (Amato & Maynard, 2007; Lichter et al., 2003; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008, Thomas & Sawhill, 2002). Black and Hispanic women have higher rates of single motherhood than White and Asian women (Sweeney & Raley, 2014; Damaske et al., 2017), and Black, Hispanic, and Native American women are more likely to be poor as single mothers as compared to White women (Damaske et al., 2017). Thus, research has identified single mothers as an important mechanism for the reproduction of poverty and the maintenance of racial gaps (see Amato & Maynard, 2007; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Haskins & Sawhill, 2016; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan, 2009; Thomas & Sawhill, 2002).

This line of reasoning is not new: "For the last several decades, social problems resulting from systemic injustices have been blamed on changes in family structure—namely, the rise in single-parent families" (Williams et al., in press). Indeed, the prevailing emphasis on family characteristics, namely family structure, is rooted in a long history that provides an important context for understanding this dominant viewpoint. In the 1920s, early sociologists theorized a "Negro pathology" of families that Moynihan (1965) popularized in his report on "The Negro Family." Moynihan's report deemed family structure, particularly non-marital childbearing and single motherhood among Black women, as "the fundamental problem" of intergenerational poverty in Black families and racial inequality. Moynihan (1965, p. 2) recommended that the solution was to establish "a stable Negro family structure," which in turn, strengthened scholarly and policy focus on family structure. This focus on family structure only intensified over time with narratives of racial progress during the Post-Civil Rights era, the rise of neoliberal ideas of individualism and "welfare queen" tropes in the 1980s, and declining rates of marriage coinciding with increased nonmarital childbearing in the 1990s and 2000s (Williams et al., forthcoming).

As follows, emphasis on single motherhood as a mechanism of poverty and inequality has meant that marriage has been deemed a practical solution to reduce poverty and poverty gaps (e.g., AEI-Brookings, 2015; Amato & Maynard, 2007; Thomas & Sawill, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2001). Even the first line of findings from the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996), which aimed to prevent welfare dependency by getting Americans off welfare and into work, states, "(1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children" (Sec. 101). More recently, the AEI-Brookings (2015) bi-partisan "Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream" emphasized encouraging marriage and delaying parenthood.

Challenging the Emphasis on Family Structure in Explaining Racial Inequality

Despite the prevailing emphasis on family structure in reducing poverty and racial inequalities in families, a growing literature demonstrates that there are differences in how family structure impacts families. These differences indicate that marriage does not produce the same benefits equally across different groups and contexts. In general, studies demonstrate greater benefits/returns of marriage for White families than for Black families. This includes, for example, greater wealth accumulation (Shapiro et al., 2013), higher upward mobility among women (Addo & Lichter, 2013), greater tax benefits (as opposed to higher tax penalties; Brown, 2021), and greater material advantages for children (Manning & Brown, 2006).

The aforementioned studies highlight the racially disparate impact of marriage, but studies also underscore the disparate impact of single motherhood across racial lines. Some recent studies have found differences in the life chances of children living in a single-mother household. In general, these studies find that Black and more disadvantaged children experience *smaller* penalties for living with a single mother. For example, single motherhood has less of an adverse impact on Black children as compared to White children (Cross, 2020). Divorce has a negative impact on children from more advantaged backgrounds, but no impact on more disadvantaged children whose parents are at a higher risk of divorce (Brand et al., 2019). Regarding poverty specifically, a recent study examining single motherhood and child poverty finds there is ethno-variation in the poverty penalty of single motherhood (i.e., the increased probability of poverty associated with single motherhood; Baker, 2022a). Despite having the highest poverty rates and greatest likelihood of living with a single mother, Black children experience the lowest penalties for single motherhood, on average. Although Hispanic children have similar poverty rates as Black children and lower rates of single motherhood than Black children, they tend to experience the highest penalties of single motherhood. Meanwhile, White children tend to have single motherhood penalties that are lower than Hispanic children and marginally higher than Black children. Yet White children experience poverty rates that are substantially lower and more stable (Baker 2022a). These findings indicate ethno-variation in child poverty and the penalties that accrue to children if they live in households headed by a single mother.

Relatedly, Williams and Baker (2021) examined various economic, health, and social risk factors associated with poverty (e.g., economic hardship, unemployment, adverse health conditions, and low social support) and assessed how the penalties for these risks (i.e., probability of poverty) varied across family structure and racial lines. In general, racial variation in poverty does not adequately correspond to racial differences in risk prevalence. Although single mothers experience higher poverty rates than married mothers, regardless of race, Black and Hispanic married mothers experience greater odds of being poor than White married mothers. Even when their number of poverty risk factors are *lower*, Black and Hispanic mothers still experience greater disadvantage than their White counterparts. Such findings support a racial stratification explanation for racial inequality across families as opposed to a behavioral explanation where marriage would be equally beneficial. That marriage is not equally beneficial across racialized groups suggests broader structural mechanisms are at play (Williams & Baker; 2021) and should be considered in family research.

Altogether, these empirical studies focusing on the impact of family structure—specifically marriage and single motherhood—highlight the racially disparate impact of family structure across families. These prior findings demonstrate that focusing heavily on family structure (and marriage as a solution), as opposed to broader factors, has not helped move the needle much in advancing our understanding of the enduring racial inequality in poverty across families in the United States. This raises the question of what else could provide us with further insight. Considering the sociological imagination, the findings from the existing studies I

have discussed thus far suggest that structural mechanisms matter for our understanding of racial inequalities across families. Thus, research on poverty and racial inequalities in poverty across families can benefit from a reorientation to a focus on both micro and macro explanations that consider socio-historical contexts, such as institutions.

Speaking to this point, a recent study provides a rare empirical assessment of racial inequality in families that links historical structural racism to contemporary family outcomes (Baker & O'Connell, 2022). The authors argue that the overemphasis on an individual-level variable (i.e., family structure) has resulted in relatively less attention given to structural factors—factors that may be useful for understanding how race and family structure intersect in the context of poverty. They assess how an indicator of structural racism—the legacy of slavery—impacts racial inequality in poverty among individuals within the same family structure. Using the historical concentration of the enslaved population in 1860 as a proxy for the legacy of slavery, the analysis reveals that the slave legacy appears to be more consequential for Black-White inequality across married-with-children households than for single-mother households. Among married-parent households, the racial gap in poverty is more pronounced where the legacy of slavery is stronger (Baker & O'Connell, 2022). These findings suggest marriage does not have the same impact on Black and White families, particularly when considering the context of structural racism.

Additionally, research on race heterogeneity among Black households suggests the legacy of structural racism in the United States lessens the socioeconomic benefits of marriage. For instance, unlike White children, living in a married two-parent household does not yield greater benefits in educational outcomes for Black children compared to those living in a single-parent household (Cross, 2021). These studies further call into question "the implicit belief that marriage is an anti-poverty mechanism that works equally across groups and context" (Baker & O'Connell, 2022, p. 35).

Implications for Research and Policy

Racial inequality in poverty and other socioeconomic outcomes across families remains a persistent issue in the United States. Explanations of this gap have focused mostly on individual factors. Though prior research has provided valuable insights into families in poverty, and individual context indeed matters, there is great utility in applying the concept of the sociological imagination to examine enduring racial inequalities. Recognizing the meaningful role of macro context, such as social and historical forces and processes, is necessary to deepen the understanding of enduring racial inequalities, such as poverty, that impact families. As such, scholars and policymakers should place more emphasis on structural racism which undergirds racial inequality in the United States. Acknowledging the impact of structural

racism would be a valuable and necessary step to advance research and policy aimed at illuminating and addressing racial inequality across families.

In terms of research, existing scholarship has made valuable contributions to our understanding of racial inequality across families, and studies focusing on individual contexts have provided some useful insights into poor families. However, focusing only on individual/family characteristics is limiting both theoretically and empirically. As a look into the literature on racial inequality helps underscore, a reorientation to more structural theories can advance poverty research and cultivate a deeper understanding of why racial inequalities in poverty across families endure. This not only refers to considering structural explanations of inequality but also acknowledging and understanding that even variation in what may often be referred to as individual characteristics (e.g., family structure, educational attainment, work status) often reflect/are a product of structural factors, such as structural racism. It also coincides with recent studies arguing that research on poverty and racial inequality should place greater emphasis on historicizing racism and integrating structural racism, particularly when considering the role of family structure. Ultimately, research on poverty and racial inequality must seek to understand how racial ideologies work to maintain racial domination and maintain racial gaps (e.g., Cross et al., 2022; Williams, 2019; Williams et al., in press).

Meaningfully incorporating structural racism into research also has important implications in terms of policy. The emphasis on family structure in poverty and racial inequality has led to policy recommendations and programs that focus on improving the "culture of marriage." Marriage promotion programs are a prime example. Such programs increased in popularity during the Bush Administration in the 2000s. Additionally, states with higher concentrations of Black populations were more likely to allocate TANF funds designed to assist low-income families toward programs encouraging marriage instead of cash assistance (Parolin, 2021). However, there has been much debate on whether marriage promotion programs are ideal or even successful (Cherlin, 2003). Although there is empirical evidence that such programs can promote better communication skills for middle-class and White couples, findings from evaluations of marriage programs for unmarried racially or ethnically diverse groups, and couples with lower incomes fail to demonstrate efficacy (Heath et al., 2016). Promoting greater financial stability in families, rather than marriage, would likely have a more positive impact on family economic well-being (Fremstad et al., 2019), and thus, be more consequential in addressing racial gaps.

To promote greater financial stability in families, it is imperative to focus attention on the macro structures and processes that impact family socioeconomic well-being. Various institutional domains (e.g., labor market, schools, housing, healthcare, the legal system, and the welfare state) play a role in shaping family economic outcomes and racial inequality across families. Moreover, part of the contemporary impact of these institutions reflects the racist legacies of historical institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow. Thus, to truly understand enduring racial inequalities across families, acknowledgment of these institutional realities as they impact families differently is critical.

It is also imperative to consider and learn from international comparative literature which emphasizes the consequential role of the welfare state in reducing poverty among families and children (e.g., Chen & Corak, 2008; Gornick & Jäntti, 2012). Reflecting structural racism in the United States, race has a strong association with perceptions, support, spending, and implementation of welfare (Brown, 2013; Johnson, 2003; Parolin, 2021) that disadvantages Black and Hispanic families relative to White families. However, these families stand to benefit the most from such social support. The COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on families across racial lines illuminated the significance of the welfare state in this regard. COVID-19 stimulus supports made a huge difference in the poverty outcomes for families, particularly among Black and Hispanic families (Parolin et al., 2022). This positive outcome underlines the potential for what policies can effectively do for families when there is not a lack of political will to do it.

In sum, an emphasis on socio-historical context, particularly the role of structural racism, would provide a more comprehensive examination of socioeconomic outcomes and overall racial inequality across families. This deeper understanding of macro-level conditions that impact individual lives would, in turn, help produce findings that can better inform policies and help craft solutions to more effectively close enduring racial gaps across families.

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